

UNKNOWN: Rockets Into Political Limelight

Portrait of Albert Gallatin Jenkins, drawn from a photograph which Congressman Jenkins is presenting.

By CONGRESSMAN

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How does a young and virtually unknown lawyer rocket upward on the political scene so high that he is elected as the youngest member of Congress in the entire nation?

This is an interesting question to trace. Undoubtedly, the greatest factors in Jenkins' success were the brilliance of his intellect, the force of his personality, and his thorough educational training.

Back in the pre-Civil War days, Congressional elections were held on the fourth Thursday in May of the odd-numbered years. Nominations were held by Congressional conventions several months before the general election in May.

First Taste Of Politics

Young Jenkins first gained wide public attention at the Democratic Congressional convention held on April 16, 1855, at Harrisville in Ritchie County. At this convention, the 24-year-old lawyer arose to second the nomination of Charles S. Lewis of Harrison County for Congress.

He made somewhat of a sensation in his seconding speech by stating that so far as he was informed, "the Democratic Party in the counties of the lower end of the district are unanimous for Mr. Lewis." Among politicians who had become somewhat hardened to the cult of sectional selfishness, the Jenkins seconding speech picked up some ears — especially around Clarksburg and Harrison County. The speech gave Jenkins attention and a fund of good will on which he could draw on later.

The Congressional campaign of 1855 was hot and close. Jenkins went on the stump and travelled far and wide to try and elect the Democratic candidate, Charles Lewis. But the prize in a close election went instead to John S. Carlile of Clarksburg, the nominee of the "American Party" (Also called

the "Know-Nothing Party.") The Congressman-elect, who later was one of the first two United States Senators from West Virginia and helped lead the movement to establish West Virginia as a separate and independent state, was running on an anti-Catholic, pro-native American platform in 1855. He won by a margin of 5,916-4,310. Jenkins

succeeded in electing Cabell County in Lewis by a 145 majority.

Art of Getting Support

At the Democratic National Convention of 1856 in Cincinnati, Jenkins learned a great deal about the art of lining up convention support behind a candidate, the pressures, the behind-the-scenes maneuvers, the arguments, the importance of "timing," and the last-minute rumors which sway the waverers. He looked and listened and learned the game well.

Returning from Cincinnati, Jenkins threw his full energies into the presidential campaign. Congressman Carlile, back from Washington, rallied the forces of the American Party behind ex-President Millard Fillmore. Everybody in western Virginia seems to have forgotten the first Republican candidate, Fremont, in 1856, and the contest over Virginia's electoral votes boiled down to a fight between Fillmore and Buchanan. Locally, Jenkins turned it into a fight between himself and Congressman Carlile, much as the Congressman resented the young whippersnapper who insisted on debating him.

It was a hot day late in August of 1856 in the town of Barboursville. Albert Gallatin Jenkins announced that he would address the citizens of Cabell County at the first quarterly Court-day. He further threw down a challenge to the Know-Nothings to come out and fight. After an hour's address, which was liberally applauded, Jenkins sat down and listened to Charleston lawyer James Laidley espouse the Know-Nothing cause for an hour. Observers

felt that the fiery young lawyer from Greenbottom had presented the best case.

The high point of the campaign came at Hurricane Bridge in Putnam County on Sept. 20, 1856, when Jenkins engaged Congressman Carlile in a verbal toe-to-toe slugfest. A tremendous crowd assembled for a noon-day barbecue on Saturday in a beautiful grove near the town. After the barbecue, the assembled gathering retired to a meeting house to listen to the speakers. Congressman Carlile led off with a speech of an hour and a half, charging the Democratic Party with responsibility for the "slavery agitation" in the country. Jenkins, tall, dark and articulate, then

talked for an hour and a half himself, polishing off his address with a series of questions to Carlile which he dared the Congressman to try and answer. In a rebuttal of three-quarters of an hour, Carlile tried to blunt the force of Jenkins' blows, and went on the defensive by trying to answer the questions. This gave an opportunity for Jenkins to spend his final three-quarters of an hour in a series of smashing conclusions to leave the best final impression.

Support In The Press

Editorially, the Kanawha Valley Star summarized the Hurricane Bridge encounter in this way:

Mr. Carlile has heretofore been regarded by his friends in this quarter as the Big Gun of Know Nothingism; that Big Gun is now completely spiked.

"The enthusiasm of the Democracy was perfectly unbounded, and toward the close of Mr. Jenkins' speech surpassed everything that we have ever witnessed.

"To judge of the ability and talent of Mr. Jenkins, it is only necessary for you to hear him. He is a young man of superior intellect, and is likely to make

a statesman of the first order."

A letter to the editor of the same newspaper claimed that "it was admitted on all hands that the young champion of Democracy had vanquished the Goliath of Know-Nothingism."

Established as Campaigner

By the time Election Day had rolled around in 1856, many voters recognized the force of Jenkins' arguments against the Know-Nothing Party (which had been so labeled because some of its secretive members, when asked about what the party stood for, simply replied: "I Know Nothing"). Buchanan carried the state of Virginia by 29,000 votes, and the Congressional District by nearly 2,000. Through Jenkins' efforts, Cabell County went for Buchanan and the Democratic ticket by 598-396, or a wider margin than the Congressional race the year before.

The 1856 presidential campaign established Albert Gallatin Jenkins not only as a top-notch campaigner, but also the man who had out-debated Congressman Carlile at Hurricane Bridge. Small wonder, then, that this helped put the 26-year-old lawyer in the limelight for the race for Congress in 1857.